

DEBRA HUMPHREYS

# College Outcomes for

FEATURED TOPIC

WHEN THE Association of American Colleges and Universities (AAC&U) launched the Liberal Education and America's Promise (LEAP) initiative in 2005, we did so with our eyes wide open. We certainly knew that it would not be easy to achieve the sort of transformation needed to ensure that higher education serves all students—and our society—more effectively. But we presented the ambitious LEAP vision for twenty-first-century learning with confidence that the necessary changes are vitally important to our nation's future, and that they are within reach. Where did this confidence come from? It came primarily from watching our members reinvent undergraduate education for a new age—with liberal education at its core.

The LEAP initiative builds on many years of

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prior work, including innovative educational reform efforts at colleges and universities of all types across the country. In fact, AAC&U and its member institutions have been hard at work on the educational challenges inherent in the LEAP vision for many years, most recently through the Greater Expectations initiative (2000–2006) and, since 2005, through LEAP itself. As part of the Greater Expectations initiative, AAC&U identified promising reforms at a variety of leading institutions and facilitated multiyear dialogues with faculty members, academic administrators, employers, accreditors, civic leaders, and K–12 educators. These dialogues made it clear that something fundamental is shifting in our society, in our economy, and in our educational institutions. We learned from these leaders and practitioners that higher education is, indeed, in a period of profound transformation, and the reason is that society itself is setting higher expectations for citizens and workers in the twenty-first century (AAC&U 2002).

The research and dialogues conducted as part of the Greater Expectations and LEAP initiatives have also made it clear to us that

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# Work, Life, and Citizenship

## **Can We Really Do It All?**



some of the core elements of an excellent education endure: the development of intellectual powers and capacities; ethical and civic preparation; personal growth and self-direction. But the particulars of educational excellence are necessarily always in flux. What counts as powerful knowledge changes periodically as

societies, cultures, and economies change. Today's transformative changes are diverse, numerous, and unsettling. Economic, environmental, global, intercultural, technological, scientific, and geopolitical shifts all have far-reaching implications for what counts as empowering knowledge. On every front, more is now being demanded from educated people—and the economy, to remain strong, needs *more* of these educated people.

### The Essential Learning Outcomes

Beginning in school, and continuing at successively higher levels across their college studies, students should prepare for twenty-first-century challenges by gaining:

#### Knowledge of Human Cultures and the Physical and Natural World

- Through study in the sciences and mathematics, social sciences, humanities, histories, languages, and the arts

*Focused by engagement with big questions, both contemporary and enduring*

#### Intellectual and Practical Skills, including

- Inquiry and analysis
- Critical and creative thinking
- Written and oral communication
- Quantitative literacy
- Information literacy
- Teamwork and problem solving

*Practiced extensively, across the curriculum, in the context of progressively more challenging problems, projects, and standards for performance*

#### Personal and Social Responsibility, including

- Civic knowledge and engagement—local and global
- Intercultural knowledge and competence
- Ethical reasoning and action
- Foundations and skills for lifelong learning

*Anchored through active involvement with diverse communities and real-world challenges*

#### Integrative Learning, including

- Synthesis and advanced accomplishment across general and specialized studies

*Demonstrated through the application of knowledge, skills, and responsibilities to new settings and complex problems*

More information about the Liberal Education and America's Promise initiative is available online at [www.aacu.org/leap](http://www.aacu.org/leap).

### What does the changing landscape mean for liberal education?

Liberal educators at the dawn of the twenty-first century confront an especially volatile global environment. Through the Greater Expectations and LEAP initiatives, we at AAC&U have taken a hard look at the challenges and opportunities presented by this environment—and we have done so with a sense of both the contemporary realities we now face and the long history of liberal education. Moreover, as a result of the Greater Expectations dialogues and the additional research we have sponsored as part of LEAP—focus groups, public forums, employer surveys, meetings with faculty members—we have identified a set of student learning outcomes that almost everyone now regards as essential (see sidebar). Of course, given that American colleges and universities are highly diverse in their missions and in the curricular approaches they take to advance them, the essential learning outcomes are inevitably described in broad terms.

As readers of *Liberal Education* will recognize, however, the LEAP vision updates as well as demonstrably builds on the enduring aims of liberal education: broad knowledge, strong intellectual skills, and a grounded sense of ethical and civic responsibility. But LEAP also moves beyond the traditional limits of liberal or liberal arts education—moving, most notably, away from the self-imposed “nonvocational” identity and rejecting the more recent association of liberal education with learning “for its own sake” alone, rather than for its practical value in real-world contexts. The LEAP vision for student learning places stronger emphasis on global and intercultural learning, technological sophistication, collaborative problem solving, transferable skills, and real-world applications—both civic and job-related. As AAC&U's president recently noted, “in all these emphases, LEAP



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repositions liberal education, no longer as an option for the fortunate few, but rather as the most practical and powerful preparation for ‘success’ in all its real-world meanings: economic, societal, civic, and personal” (Schneider 2008, 3).

**Is this just rhetoric?**

**Can we really do all that?**

We have been gratified by the creativity with which institutions of all sorts are adapting the LEAP vision in order to advance their own institutional change agendas. Students and faculty at Miami Dade College, for instance, came together in October 2007 to sign a covenant of engagement with ten learning outcomes based on the LEAP vision (Padrón 2008). The covenant ceremony demonstrated a campus-wide commitment to the core values of liberal education, including a commitment to foster in all students the ability to “communicate effectively” and to “solve problems using critical and creative thinking and scientific reasoning.” To help students achieve these outcomes, Miami Dade College is providing multiple, varied, and intentional learning experiences through both academic disciplines and cocurricular activities.

The California State University—the largest state system of higher education in the country—recently established new guidelines for general education courses that “focus on core values of liberal education” and are framed by the LEAP essential learning outcomes. Each campus in the system is developing its own curricular designs, however, to ensure that its students achieve the outcomes. And Brown University (2008) recently unveiled its own new approach to providing a twenty-first-century liberal education. While retaining its well-known lack of formal general education requirements, Brown is educating all students about the values of liberal education. Every department is reviewing its major requirements and curricula to ensure that students are achieving a core set of intellectual capacities keyed to the aims of liberal learning.

Nonetheless, we recognize that many obstacles stand in the way of bringing the LEAP vision to reality for all students. From a lack of *awareness* about what really is needed for success in today’s workforce to a lack of *resources* to support the necessary learning, the obstacles

are daunting. But some recent trends—including those relating to the pace of change and the need for innovation in the economy—work in our favor.

The biggest challenge we face,

however, is demographic. We are attempting to educate far more students at much higher levels of learning than ever before. And this new cohort of college students is larger, more diverse, and probably less well prepared for college-level learning than were cohorts in earlier eras. Yet we are firmly convinced that the success of our economy and our democracy both depend on making excellence inclusive; we must find a way to provide *all* students with the outcomes of a quality liberal education.

Some might ask whether the LEAP vision is too broad, too idealistic, too ambitious. Others might ask whether our claim to discern an emerging consensus on essential learning outcomes is really just a cynical or even disingenuous assertion designed to forestall inappropriate governmental intervention or, in a purely self-interested way, to limit trends toward narrow vocationalism at all levels of education. In the remainder of this article, I want to focus on two key questions: Is there really a consensus about outcomes across a wide array of stakeholders? And with a single set of learning outcomes, can we really accomplish several goals at once—preparing students to be critical and informed citizens, while also providing them with skills and knowledge to succeed professionally in a competitive global economy?

**Is there really consensus support  
for liberal education?**

Through the Greater Expectations initiative, we examined the goals for undergraduate learning stated by hundreds of AAC&U member institutions and dozens of accrediting organizations—both regional and specialized. This review of what *educators* believe should be the broad outcomes of college learning established the basis for the LEAP initiative. Building on that consensus across the academy and its accrediting bodies, AAC&U then engaged others outside of higher education—those in public policy sectors, elected officials, philanthropic leaders, and employers of all sorts—in discussion about their own expectations for college learning.

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It became very clear early in these public dialogues that a broad consensus was, in fact, emerging. And additional research that AAC&U has sponsored confirms that this consensus extends to leaders in business and industry across many areas of the economy. Through the LEAP initiative, AAC&U has commissioned several national surveys and sponsored several focus groups with business leaders. This research suggests that business leaders do not tend to use the language of “liberal education.” Instead, they focus on what they need college graduates to know and be able to do so that they can “hit the ground running” in a very fast-moving economic environment. Yet precisely because of that challenging environment, employers do strongly endorse the broad knowledge of science and society and the intellectual and practical skills that characterize liberal education. And, moreover, they strongly affirm a heightened emphasis on intercultural and ethical learning in college.

When presented with a description of liberal education and asked how important they feel it is for colleges and universities to provide this type of education, 95 percent of business leaders surveyed said that it was “fairly” or “very important” for them to do so. In fact, 76 percent of employers would recommend this type of education to a young person they know. AAC&U’s national surveys also examined the specific liberal education outcomes commonly endorsed by educators and asked whether business leaders really want colleges to place more emphasis on these outcomes for all students. A clear majority of business leaders want colleges to place more emphasis on the skills and areas of knowledge that are cultivated through a liberal education (AAC&U 2008).

Taking cues from the limited number of people who formally recruit on college campuses, some college educators believe that employers only pay lip service to liberal education but actually prefer graduates who are more narrowly trained in professional fields. AAC&U’s research suggests that this is not the case. A clear majority of the employers we surveyed think colleges and universities should focus on providing all students with both a well-rounded education and knowledge in a specific

field. As one employer put it, “I look for people who can take accountability, responsibility, and are good team people over anything else. I can teach the technical.” Another focus group participant noted, “when I hire someone, I’m investing in them. I want them to be able to study, to analyze,

to present, to write” (Peter D. Hart Research Associates 2007).

The clear message that has emerged from years of research, then, is that at least at a general level, there is, indeed, an emerging consensus on the most important outcomes of college. Moreover, it is clear from all this research that business leaders strongly endorse liberal education outcomes—including those related to ethics, values, and responsibility. Fifty-six percent of those we surveyed, for instance, believe that colleges should place more emphasis on cultivating in students a strong sense of integrity and ethics.

The business leaders whose counsel we have sought through the LEAP initiative also confirm that employers want to hire college graduates with broad skills as well as a developed sense of civic and personal responsibility. In addition, they argue that *innovation* is the single most important ingredient to future economic success at the individual corporate level and at a national level. And because they take a long-term view, “yes-men” or “yes-women” are the last thing *these* leaders believe that corporate America needs right now. This innovation imperative is one of the reasons we believe we can accomplish our educational goals through liberal education, which has always been the best preparation for dealing creatively with change.

**Can we really accomplish multiple goals  
with one set of learning outcomes?**

College education can effectively—and simultaneously—prepare students for both professional success and responsible citizenship. We believe this not because of some theoretical educational models, but because we see every day how leading AAC&U member institutions are already organizing their students’ educational experiences to meet multiple goals. They are providing students with contextual learning in the arts and sciences; practice in

scientific and humanistic inquiry and problem solving on issues, both enduring and contemporary; and opportunities to apply what they are learning in community-based settings, in nonprofit organizations, and through internships of all sorts. These programs are strengthening students' liberal learning, rather than diminishing it. They are helping students become responsible citizens *and* thoughtful practitioners. Colleges and universities have an obligation to their students and our society to do nothing less. As Grant Cornwell (2008) recently put it in his inaugural speech as incoming president of the College of Wooster, it is right and fair that students and their families expect a Wooster education to empower them to do well in the world. [A quality liberal education] provides access to leadership and, for many, prosperity. Access to leadership and prosperity is also, therefore, access to influence, and with the ability to influence comes the obligation to apply influence in the service of justice, fairness, respect, and decency.

Cornwell is surely right that liberal educators have a heightened obligation to educate the next generation of leaders to be responsible, especially as they become successful.

Moreover, it is useful to remember that the multiple goals related to professional success, ethical leadership, and responsible citizenship have never really been as separate as some suggest. The truth is that there has never been a sustained period in our nation's history when higher education was divorced from the task of preparing students for work—preparing them, indeed, for success in a market economy. Even at our most traditional and elite liberal arts colleges like the one I attended as a first-generation student in the early 1980s, students may pursue degrees in the traditional liberal arts and sciences fields rather than in more defined professional fields. But these same students have always known that a job—and probably a well-paying job—will await them after graduation. Frankly, these institutions don't really need to connect their learning goals with their students' professional aspirations because, year after year, they send their graduates on to prestigious graduate schools, law schools, medical schools, or to highly remunerative careers in finance, advertising, and consulting.

As a first-generation college student, I was

undoubtedly far more aware than many of my classmates of what my parents risked and sacrificed and worried about in sending me to an elite liberal arts college. They certainly took it on faith that my education would prepare me both for work and for an examined and responsible life as an “educated” person. Today's students and their parents—especially those without much experience of higher education—are, justifiably, even more concerned about success in an even more volatile and precarious job market than the one I faced. What the LEAP vision provides is a more comprehensive and comprehensible map of that path to becoming an educated person. It also responds to the perfectly legitimate question my parents and others like them pose: How exactly will this education prepare my child for a successful life, *including* a successful career?

In developing curricular designs for the twenty-first century, colleges and universities simply do not have the luxury of ignoring either the realities of the contemporary labor market or their students' own professional aspirations. In survey after survey, college students say that they seek a college education *primarily* to ensure their future professional success. This is true whether they attend Harvard University, the University of Wisconsin–Oshkosh, or LaGuardia Community College. However, in the AAC&U focus groups held with high school and college students, we found that students do not connect their educational and economic aspirations in a simplistic, narrow, or short-term sense. Substantial financial reward is not their top priority (Peter D. Hart Research Associates 2004).

In a clear-eyed way, students know that they must make their way in a knowledge economy. They know that a college education is the key to economic opportunity and stability. But in our focus groups, students talked much more about wanting fulfilling and rewarding work than about wanting a lot of money or prestige. A more recent survey conducted by the National Association of Colleges and Employers revealed that, when asked to rank the qualities they seek in their first jobs, college graduates list a high starting salary below opportunity for advancement, job security, health insurance, friendly coworkers, and opportunities for personal development (Koc 2008).

Like generations before them, today's students want professional success, but they also aspire to something more. They want to build a better future for themselves, for their communities, and for future generations. All the efforts that educators at all levels have made for decades

to introduce students to community service and civic engagement are paying off in a new

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generation of students who yearn for lives of purpose and meaning (Astin 2004). It would be foolish—and even condescending—for educators to ignore the complexity of these aspirations.

Only about 10 percent of BA degree holders currently work in the nonprofit sector,

and only about 20 percent work in the public sector. Yet a larger percentage of those working



Frostburg State  
University



in both sectors (about 50 percent) hold *at least* a BA degree, compared to those working in the private sector (30 percent). Economists warn that future shortages of workers will be proportionally larger in the public and nonprofit sectors (U.S. Census Bureau). We can and should encourage students to consider careers in government and nonprofit organizations. But the reality remains that a vast majority of college graduates—nearly three-quarters—are making their way in the world by working at for-profit companies. Indeed, some are even creating their own for-profit companies. Moreover, graduates are likely to move among the different economic sectors throughout the course of their careers. All students deserve the opportunity to follow their own dreams, and a college education should prepare them as well as possible for whatever career paths they choose.

While preparing students for successful work lives, we also owe it to society to ensure that these same students—whatever careers they pursue—have a strong ethical compass and a commitment to civic and personal responsibility. Colleges can, and indeed must, do both of these things. The task of meeting these multiple educational goals is not all that different today than in years past, although the skills needed for citizenship and work are more complex. It isn't an either-or choice, and it never has been.

As Stanley Katz (2008) put it in a recent blog posting, "is it wrong for our students to go to work for AT&T, Proctor & Gamble, or Sara Lee? I don't think so . . . What counts, I think, is that their liberal education causes them to reflect on what it is they are doing for a living, how they are doing it, and what more they can do to live a fully examined life." This is why we must rededicate ourselves to liberal education, to providing more students with the full set of learning outcomes they need. And this is why we must help students, their parents, and policymakers understand that what counts as "college success" is not limited to whether students earn degrees in particular subject areas. "College success" also depends on whether students achieve the level of preparation they need to thrive in a fast-changing economy and within turbulent, highly demanding, global, societal, and often personal contexts. Indeed, this more comprehensive—and, yes, ambitious—understanding of "college success," along with our shared obligation as

educators to help all students achieve it, is at the very heart of the LEAP vision of college learning for the twenty-first century. □

To respond to this article, e-mail [liberaled@aacu.org](mailto:liberaled@aacu.org), with the author's name on the subject line.

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